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ABSTRACT

A model program to provide family services, the Family Center is a facility of a public school system in Clayton, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. Components of the program include parent classes based on the age and developmental level of the child; workshops; informal support groups; individual counseling; activity workshops; for parents and children together; and a newsletter. Specifically discussed are the underlying philosophy of the Family Center and methods used by group leaders in running parent meetings. Emphasis is placed on the adoption of practical and concrete methods of parenting and the avoidance of abstract, intellectual discussions by the group leader. The following four strategies for enhancing parental authority are elaborated: improvement of problem-solving skills, enhancement of parents' self-esteem, communication and independence through involvement in support groups, and appropriate use of abstract and professional terminology. In addition, handouts about problems with group members and in group leadership suggest to group leaders responses to common behaviors and situations that may occur during group sessions. (DST)

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# Promoting Powerful Parents:
# A Model for Parent Discussion Groups and Classes

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Marshall MacLuhan told us twenty years ago that "the media is the message." By this he meant that the method by which information is presented is often a more important element of the message we send than the information itself. This is particularly true of the information we present to parents of infants and toddlers because it must be integrated into everyday behavior in order to be useful. Simply an intellectual grasp of the material is not enough. Parents must accept and understand it at a much deeper emotional level to actually change behavior. By presenting material in a manner that enhances self-esteem, encourages self discovery, personalizes information, and nurtures group support, group leaders can create a climate conducive to this level of acceptance and understanding.

In the next twenty minutes I will focus on some specific ways to achieve these objectives. First, I'll describe The Family Center, discuss some of the philosophic underpennings on which the program is based and tell you how we actualize these ideas. Then I'll discuss ways in which we as professionals can empower parents. And last, I'll distribute some handouts on "Common Problems with Group Members" and "Common Problems in Group Leadership." If time permits I'll discuss these sheets.

The Family Center is part of the School District of Clayton, a public school system in a suburb of St. Louis,

Missouri. The program, which was launched in 1975, is based on the belief that the earliest years of a child's life are the most important in forming a strong foundation for learning and that good parenting is the single most important ingredient in this process. In the past ten years a multi-faceted program has been developed to translate this philosophy into action. Components of this program include parent classes based on the age and developmental level of the child (Early Infancy birth to 9 months; Parent-Infant, 9-21 months; Parent-Toddler, 21-36 months; and Parent-Child, 3-5 years) and workshops based on specific topics or areas of interest (i.e., Discipline; Self-Concept; Forming A Parenting Partnership; Father's Workshop; Family Dynamics; Fear, Anger and Dependence). In addition we offer informal support groups (Lunch Bunch), individual counseling, and activity workshops for parents and children together (Kindergym, Motorifics, Music, Cooking). We also publish a newsletter for parents of children birth to 8 years which we are distributing nationally.

All of our parent groups take place in one of three large rooms which are furnished with toys and equipment for young children as well as a round table for parents and a blackboard. The parents meet at the table with one member of our parent education staff while the children are supervised by a child development teacher who is assisted by one or two

parent volunteers. Although this arrangement was instituted originally because of a lack of space, we have continued it because we've found it affords us a number of very special educational opportunities. Just as Fleming saw something important in his moldy petrie dishes, we capitalize on an accidental discovery.

First, this arrangement forces both the leader and the parents to keep the discussion on a high level of reality and honesty. It avoids abstract, intellectual discussions which may be interesting in and of themselves but have a low probability of being translated into action in everyday life, and it makes it difficult to deny children's behavior because it is happening right before the group.

Second, it gives the group leader the opportunity to intervene directly in a wide array of parent-child interactions. This enables the leader to be extremely specific, personal, and concrete which greatly heightens the probability that his/her interventions will be effective in changing behavior. For example, a central developmental task for young children is separation from parents. Generally speaking the toys, activities in the room, and the other children and adults are intriguing enough to a child to encourage her to leave mom or dad for awhile to play. Sometimes, however, this process is complicated by the fact that parents are sending a number of subtle cues to the child not to leave the security of a parents' lap

and venture out into a wider world. Because parent and child are in the same room these clues can be brought to parents' attention. Often this is all that is necessary to help parents more expediently facilitate the process of separation. If this is not sufficient and further counseling is necessary then the class has served as a screening device. Even those families who are experiencing no problems with separation report that they benefit from a better understanding of the separation process. To achieve this we explain that separation is a life-long process that is accomplished by children running out into the world for short periods and then returning to the safety of parents' laps for "emotional refueling" only to return again to the outside world for a little longer period. This process is repeated over and over again with less time for "refueling" and more time playing.

We ask parents to arrive on time, to spend about ten minutes playing with their child, then to sit down at the table. Once parents are seated we ask them to remain so unless there is an emergency or their child needs a diaper change. This forces the child to be active in pursuit of getting his/her needs met and puts him/her in control of his/her environment which makes separation much easier. We instruct parents to provide all the emotional nurturance the child needs but not to entertain him/her or engage in conversation. The clarity and concreteness of these instructions help parents

understand and facilitate the separation process.

Third, having children in the same room provides a virtual laboratory of child development right in front of the group. This enables the group leader to use concrete examples which all group participants can observe to illustrate his/her points and gives parents the opportunity to observe other children at the same stage of development as their child.

Fourth, this arrangement enables the group leader numerous opportunities to "reframe" parents' thinking. For example, she/he might help a parent who sees her child as "hyperactive" which has pathologic connotations to see her child instead as a "very active" child which simply describes an individual difference, or the parent who labels his child as "shy" can be helped to see that the child simply likes to watch for awhile before taking part in an activity. These seemingly small shifts in thinking often make a great deal of difference in the quality of parenting a child receives. It has been our observation that any label a parent gives a child at a young age tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Therefore we think it is important to help parents of very young children to see their children in a positive light.

Empowering Parents

In Families and Family Therapy, Salvador Minuchin tells us that "Parents cannot carry out their executive function unless they have the power to do so." Parental power comes from many sources. First, young children are totally dependent on their parents for the fulfillment of all their physical and emotional needs and are therefore eager to please.

Second, parents are larger than their children; i.e., if a parent wants a young child to sit in a car seat and she resists he simply picks her up and puts her in the seat.

Third, parents derive power from their own sense of self worth. Parents with low self-esteem tend to feel powerless and have difficulty protecting and setting limits for their children.

Fourth, parents get power from the way they are viewed and treated by the people around them. This includes relatives and friends, professionals (teacher, doctors, nurses, social workers, etc.) and society-at-large. Unfortunately, even with the best of intentions we professionals are often guilty of lowering parental self-esteem rather than raising it and thus make parents feel powerless instead of more powerful.

When you sit down to talk to a parent it is interesting to imagine that each of you has a bucket sitting in front of you. Each bucket is filled with self-esteem. It is important as a professional that you don't dip in the parent's bucket in order to fill your own. Rather, a skilled pro-

fessional uses her skills to enhance the parent rather than the other way around. This process is often rather subtle and requires constant vigilance. At The Family Center we work continually to raise our consciousness so that we do nothing to destroy parents' self-esteem or authority and everything we can do to enhance both. Following are four means of enhancing or degrading parental authority and self-esteem.

First, problem-solving. Parents frequently bring their problems to us. If we see ourselves as "fixers of problems" or as "advice-givers" we tend to degrade parental self-esteem or at least we miss opportunities for enhancing it. Parents become more and more dependent on us for advice and less and less confident in their own judgement. If, on the other hand, we see our role as helping parents improve their problem-solving skills they become less and less dependent on us and more and more confident in their own abilities. When we have problems most of us either deny we have them or keep trying the same thing over and over again even though it doesn't work. Helping parents recognize and clearly define problems while they are still small, helping them learn to generate alternatives and expand their thinking beyond simple "either-or" solutions, and helping them develop a plan of action and providing support so that they follow through with their plans are useful strategies for encouraging independence, enhancing

self-esteem, and impowering parents.

Second, we can enhance or lower self-esteem by the way we disseminate information. We don't really "own" ideas and facts that are told to us by someone else and thus find them difficult to integrate into everyday behavior. On the other hand, information we discover for ourselves "belongs to us" and is easily integrated into behavior. In addition, if we are told something by someone else we become dependent on them and tend to feel less confident ourselves. However, if we discover something on our own our self-confidence and sense of independence are greatly enhanced. Thus it becomes the job of a professional to help parents discover information for themselves rather than telling them what to do. One simple technique for doing this is to ask a parent to talk about his/her child ("Tell me about Jason") then listen carefully and paraphrase to what a parent is saying. Usually parents are very perceptive about their children and will tell you almost everything you were planning to tell them. Your job then becomes one of helping them rearrange the information so that it is more useful in helping them make decisions and plan strategies. When the original information comes from them and not you, you encourage independence, enhance self-esteem, and empower parents.

Other techniques for helping parents discover answers for themselves include brainstorming, group problem-solving,

and suggestions for directing thinking (i.e. "You might want to think about what you are teaching Johnny when rocking him to sleep every night.").

Third, professionals can empower parents and raise their self-esteem by helping them make connections with each other and with the community-at-large. Isolation or feelings of isolation lead to depression.

Parents who are depressed and "needy" themselves find it difficult to impossible to recognize or meet their children's needs. Programs which focus solely on the parent to professional relationship tend to make parents feel increasingly dependent on the professional and less powerful themselves. Parents need the same opportunities as do other professionals to come together to exchange ideas and provide support for one another. It is for this reason that we have developed a center-based rather than a home-based program. We feel that the very act of getting parents out of their homes is therapeutic. Therefore, all home visits have as their ultimate goal to get parents involved in center activities.

Professionals sometimes dip into parents' bucket of self-esteem and steal power from them when they are unaware of, or dishonest about, their own feelings. Carl Rodgers told us that in order to help another person grow we must have "unconditional positive regard" for them. Because we

professionals are human beings and have human feelings we sometimes respond to parents with dislike, anger, or blame. If we are unaware of these feelings we tend to send parents mixed messages which leaves them feeling confused, powerless and often angry. Our first responsibility is to be aware of our feelings. Secondly, we need to "reframe" our thinking so we see parents in a positive light. Three ways to do this are to see the parent in the context of the whole family, to remember that every person's behavior makes sense from their point of view, and to think of three things you like about the parent.

Salvadore Minuchin uses the metaphor of a kaleidoscope to describe the myriad of patterns of which we are all a part. If we see a parent as a "single piece of glass" rather than part of a larger pattern we are likely to misinterpret their behavior. For example, a mother who seems to be unable to set limits for her child may be reacting to her husband who is overly harsh in setting limits. The father's harshness on the other hand may also be a response to mother's leniency. Cause and effect thinking is rarely useful in understanding the dynamics of a family. "A" usually causes "B" which in turn causes "A", etc. The dynamics are circular rather than linear. If we forget this, we may erroneously place "blame" on a particular family member. We then try to "fix" that member and frequently disempower him/her and/or

other family members in the process.

If every person's behavior makes sense from her point of view our job is to "get inside" that parent and experience her sense of the world. We may then want to help her reorganize her world so that it works better for her and her family. A simple trick I use when I start to feel negative about a parent is to think of three things I like about that person. This never fails to get me back on the path of "unconditional positive regard."

I have also found it useful to attend to the non-verbal as well as the verbal messages the parent and I are sending to one another. Special attention needs to be paid to non-verbal communication (context, body language) which makes up 53% of the messages we send, and to paralinguistic behavior (choice of words, phrasing, tone of voice) which is 40% of our communication. Only 7% of communication's meaning is taken from verbal content.

Finally professionals sometimes make parents feel powerless when they present ideas in abstract terms and use professional jargon. In order to avoid this, professionals need to listen carefully to the language parents use when describing their children and families and observe parents' and children's behavior closely. They can then use parents' own words to describe their children and thus build a bond with parents. They can use concrete, observable behavior

to illustrate abstract points and thus personalize information so that it becomes easily understandable and useful to parents. Finally, it enables the professional to build metaphors based on the parents' own interests and understanding to build further understanding of child and family development.

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a growing place

## Common Problems with Group Members

Individual members of a group may engage in particular behavior which can be disruptive and/or destructive to the group dynamics. This section contains suggested leader responses to the more common behaviors that might arise.

| Behavioral Style | Suggested Leader's Response |
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| 1. Continually breaks rules of group | 1. Be certain that rules have been clearly established and understood by all members of the group. When this has been done at the outset the leader can call attention to the rule that has not been followed and not be seen as personally attacking a specific member. |
| 2. "Chatty;" tends to socialize during class | 2. Re-focus the group or individual on the designated class topic calling attention to the limited amount of time available for each session. Acknowledge the enjoyment received from visiting with group members and suggest some alternative times for this, i.e. during coffee break or during play period at the beginning of class. |
| 3. Quiet; little or no participation | 3. Work on making her comfortable in the group. Spend some time with her before class drawing her into conversation with other members. Be positive about input she does provide; let her know her ideas are important to the group. Emphasize her expertise, i.e. "Janice, I think you've had some successful experience in toilet training. Would you share your approach with the group?" Avoid bombarding her with "What do you think, Janice?" |

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| 4. Critical of other group members | 4. Like the quiet member this person needs help in feeling comfortable with the group. Attend more to her appropriate group behavior than her criticism. Encourage positive alliances with other group members. "Beth, I think your suggestions might be very helpful to Susan and Jane. Could you tell us more about them?" Emphasize and model respect for all group members. |
| 5. Interrupts frequently | 5. Re-direct group's attention to speaker who has been interrupted. "Leslie, hold onto that thought for a minute. I don't think Susan was finished." Remember to then go back to Leslie. When possible ask for comments or responses from her before she interrupts. Again, you may need to re-state rules about listening to others in the group. |
| 6. Attempts to usurp power of leader | 6. Maintain your role as group leader by re-directing this person's need to be "in charge." Invite her comments and ideas but set appropriate time limits. "I can see that you have several ideas on this subject, Elaine, but we need to move on to the next point. Perhaps we could talk further after class." Generally this style indicates some uncertainty about group acceptance. You need to help this person feel that she is a valuable part of the group, so she doesn't have to set herself above it in order to feel important. |
| 7. Discounts or negates ideas of the group | 7. Avoid the temptation to "convince" this person by long lists of facts or heated debate. Individuals within the group are entitled to their own points of view. Acknowledge this by saying "We disagree on this concept" or "This idea doesn't seem to fit with your experience." Reassure the person that no one is pushing her to agree with or accept an idea. You may ask her to think about it further before formulating a definite opinion. |

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| 8. "Perfect" parent | 8. Focus on concrete specifics rather than generalities. For example, in discussing bedtime behaviors ask her to share details of her child's bedtime routine which leads to her "no problems at all." Remember a "perfect" appearance frequently serves to hide feelings of vulnerability. Work on helping this parent realize that "non-perfect" is not only acceptable, it is the universal human condition! |
| 9. Intellectualizes | 9. As with the "perfect parent" the leader needs to move from abstract theory to concrete realities. |
| 10. "Different" in background, education, child-rearing style, etc. | 10. Focus on her positive qualities which make her a valuable asset to the group. Avoid seeing her differences as weaknesses. |
| 11. Comments aren't related to topic at hand or are confusing to others in the group | 11. Help her to clarify her thinking by voicing your lack of understanding, i.e. "I'm not sure I see how that is related. Would you explain your idea further," or "Do you mean _____?" |
| 12. Monopolizes discussion: has perennial problems | 12. Set firm limits; be assertive about time parameters and the need for everyone to have an opportunity to participate. Arrange time outside of class to address problems or concerns at more length. |
| 13. Embarrassed by child's behavior in class | 13. Acknowledge parent's feelings rather than avoiding the issue. Discuss with group how you might all be supportive of this parent and decide on specific intervention of child's behavior. |

Anyone of these problem behaviors may warrant more attention than can efficiently and effectively be given within the group setting. If a particular concern continues to arise discuss the issue with the parent outside of class. The parent may be in need of some extended counseling or other

professional assistance. Group leaders need to be familiar with various child and family related resources in their local area and should feel free to make referrals when they're indicated. When referrals are made leaders must be prepared to be supportive of the parent/family in their attempts to resolve their difficulties.

## Common Problems in Group Leadership

| Problem | Solution |
|---|---|
| 1. Presenting too many ideas | 1. Present only 2 or 3 ideas. Spend remaining time increasing understanding of these concepts rather than introducing new ideas. |
| 2. Lecturing | 2. Never talk for more than 10 minutes without asking for group reaction or participation. |
| 3. Rescuing - Taking care of people who don't need to be helped or who don't want to be helped | 3. See people as strong and capable rather than weak and vulnerable. Do this by focusing on their strengths and expecting them to behave in a strong, capable manner. |
| 4. Concealed anger with a group member | 4. Discuss expectations clearly and fully during the first session. Confront parents immediately if they don't meet these expectations. Don't let bits and pieces of anger accumulate. |
| 5. Aligning with one spouse against the other | 5. Encourage participants to discuss problems with spouse before making final decisions. Before giving advice, ask about spouses' feelings and opinions. Discuss both spouses' family histories. |
| 6. Not liking or approving of a group member | 6. Develop "positive regard" for all group members by focusing on their strengths and trying to understand what it would be like to "walk in their shoes." |
| 7. Lack of Rule Enforcement | 7. Establish a clear set of mutually agreed upon rules during the first session and enforce rules as problems arise. Don't let them accumulate. |

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| 8. Giving too much general advice | 8. Never give advice unless it is asked for. Personalize it by asking open-ended questions first. Make your advice short (2 or 3 sentences) then wait for parent response before proceeding. Finally, make sure parents understand what you have suggested by asking for feedback. |
| 9. Usurping power from parents or from the group | 9. Structure lessons so that parents develop their own solutions to problems, rather than you telling them what to do. Encourage group members to give each other information and support. (e.g. Instead of answering a question a member poses to you, ask for opinions from the group.) |
| 10. Leader feels a group member knows more than she/he does (e.g. has educational background in child development, pediatrics, etc.) | 10. See participant as a whole person, not just as his/her intellectual achievements or professional expertise. Respect his strengths and provide support where needed. Focus on participants' needs rather than your need for approval. |
| 11. Using the group to engrandize and empower leader instead of participants | 11. Group leaders should develop resources for meeting their needs outside of the group. During group sessions focus on parents' needs rather than your needs. If you have a problem (e.g. illness in the family) that is consuming a good deal of your energy and attention, tell the group. This avoids participants misinterpreting your behavior. |
| 12. Leader loses control of the discussion | 12. Develop a general outline for the class and control discussion enough to cover major points. ("That sounds like another whole discussion. Let's save it for next time." "We don't have time to discuss that now, but you might want to think about what your response is teaching your child.") Leave plenty of time in your outline for discussion. |

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| 13. Playing the role of a psychotherapist | 13. Focus on the purpose of the group which is education and support. Develop strategies for redirecting the group when the discussion begins to become too therapeutic. (e.g. "I th..k that's very important. However, there isn't time to discuss it fully now. Let's make an individual appointment after the group session.") Protect both the individual and the group by acknowledging the situation and then moving on. ("Mary, I appreciate you sharing your problem with us. However, I think it may be too complicated for us to deal with here. Let's discuss it after class.") Be careful to offer continual support for this person. Don't ignore her. |